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Next 1 Page(s) In Document Denied

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26 September 1980

MEMORANDUM

IRAN: FRAGMENTATION IN THE FUTURE?

The Iran-Iraq conflict could create a political dynamic leading to the partition of Iran. Creation of autonomous regions or independent mini-nations in some or all of the territory around the Iranian periphery occupied by ethnic minorities could evolve from several scenarios. These developments would inevitably engage the interests of the USSR, Iraq, Turkey and Pakistan, each of which is deeply concerned about the evolution of political power in Iran and the surrounding region.

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Iran was no longer a centralized state when the conflict with Iraq erupted last week. In the nineteen months since the fall of the Shah's government, the Khomeini regime has not firmly controlled border provinces occupied by Iranian minorities dissatisfied with central government policies.

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The political objectives of the various minority peoples vary substantially.

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- The Kurds in the northwest have a long history of dissidence. The well-armed Kurds were able quickly to assert de facto control over much of their area after the collapse of the monarchy. They have extended their control despite government military campaigns that force them from the towns into the hills.

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[redacted]

Iraqi incursions against Iranian installations in the northwest are limiting Tehran's ability to hold back the dissidents. The major Kurdish dissident groups--leftists of various persuasions--have ties to the USSR and have been receiving some aid from Iraq. They have sought autonomy, not independence. [redacted]

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-- The Azarbayjanis--Iran's largest minority--are well integrated into the mainstream of Iranian society. Their loyalty to Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, whose moderate positions contrast with Khomeini's, and the traditional strength of leftist groups in the far north have prevented pro-Khomeini forces from consolidating control in their homelands. Unlike most other major ethnic groups, the Azarbayjanis have been in peaceful opposition with the exception of the short-lived disturbances, mainly in Tabriz, in late 1979 and early 1980. [redacted]

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-- The Turkomans along the Caspian coast have clashed repeatedly with government forces and seem to have won considerable autonomy. Their leaders may have well-developed contacts across the Soviet border, but have not been pressing for independence. [redacted]

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-- Baluchis in the southeast appear to have asserted autonomy similar to that of the Kurds, but with less violence, possibly because of the isolation of the province. Some dissidents there have contacts with the USSR and Iraq as well as with their dissident kin in Pakistan. Reports conflict on whether the strongest groups want autonomy or independence and on their attitude toward the USSR. [redacted]

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-- Arab dissidence largely ended in mid-1979 when the Khomeini regime took the aged Arab spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khaqani, into house arrest in Qom. Under the administration of former provincial Governor-General Madani, the Arabs were generally crushed. Most of the continued terrorist incidents in their homelands were probably carried out by Iraqi agents or radical Iranian leftists. When active, the major Arab dissident groups pressed for local

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[redacted]

autonomy in terms similar to that demanded by the Kurds. Some radical Arab leaders have called for independence. [redacted]

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[redacted] presumably to discuss a possible role in an Iraqi sponsored local Arab regime. [redacted]

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- The Qashqais of south central Iran tried to work within the new Islamic system, but their leaders realized in the past few months that the Khomeini regime intended to eliminate tribal chiefs, who have emerged as local leaders under the weak central government. Qashqai leaders have been able to keep most government forces out of their homelands and the tribe has remained peaceful except when one of their leaders was arrested for a short time in mid-1980. The Qashqai have been arming, but--like the Azarbayjanis--they want to overthrow Khomeini rather than break away from central control. [redacted]

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The Fragmentation of Iran

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[redacted]

Such Iraqi actions could trigger centrifugal movement in other parts of Iran. Fragmentation could occur in several ways especially if the conflict with Iraq depletes the Iranian government's armed forces seriously enough that Tehran cannot retain control at least of the major towns, road and rail links in outlying provinces. [redacted]

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- De facto federalization: local leaders in one or more areas assume control of regional reins of power; Tehran protests, but the weakness of its armed forces compels it to tolerate the situation. [redacted]

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[redacted]

-- De jure federalization: local leaders formally announce establishment of regional autonomy and to compel Tehran to agree officially. [redacted]

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-- Disintegration: leaders in one or more areas declare independence with or without foreign backing or foreign forces move into border areas to forestall actions by local Iranian leaders contrary to the interests of the foreign government. [redacted]

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Incentives and Constraints

The Iran-Iraq conflict may lift some of the constraints that have influenced local leaders to seek sectarian equality under the constitution and local autonomy rather than independence. [redacted]

-- If oil revenues are unavailable to the Tehran regime, minorities will not look to the central regime for local investment and subsidies.

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-- If the armed forces, especially its airborne units are substantially weakened, the balance of power between dissident and government forces will shift in the minorities' favor, at least for the short term.

-- Foreign governments may offer attractive aid. [redacted]

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Important constraints would remain. With foreign backing, local leaders would be the tools of the foreign government, subordinate to the advancement of its interests rather than their own. Unless they can expect continued foreign backing however, their homelands would be fair game as soon as a central government was able to regroup its armed forces. If more than one area seceded, cooperation among their disparate populations would not be likely and the central government would have the option of moving against them one by one. [redacted]

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Most minority leaders could not easily dominate autonomous or independent administrations. Rival local political forces would have to be put down and territorial disagreements with other ethnic groups settled by force. Their people's hopes for an end to fighting and increases in their standard of living would have to be postponed. [redacted]

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Azarbayjanis, Qashqais and others would take advantage of significant weakness in Tehran, not to opt for self-government, but rather to topple the Khomeini regime and set up a more

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moderate Islamic government. Qashgai leaders claim to have close contacts with the widely respected Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, whom they would try to enlist along with other moderate Shia clerics in support of a coup. Such an effort would probably have the cooperation of some of the remaining military units of the central government and, possibly, Turkey and/or Pakistan. [redacted]

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Radical leftist groups--Mujahedin and Fedayeen--who have been active among the minorities, but have no territorial base of their own, support increased local autonomy in a constitutional framework, but would not necessarily support independence or formal autonomy for their ethnic allies. [redacted]

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Foreign Attitudes

The Soviets probably would view the establishment of opposition regimes within Iran as the first step leading to Iran's disintegration into various ethnic regions. The Soviets probably would be ambivalent about such a course of events. [redacted]

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They undoubtedly see potential benefits accruing from such developments, but they probably view these as balanced by corresponding disadvantages. If Iran fragments, however, the chances of Soviet involvement and military intervention would increase significantly. [redacted]

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Iran's fragmentation into a number of independent ethnic areas would enable the USSR to work for pro-Soviet, stable regimes on their southern border as well as in other regions of Iran. It already has assets in many areas, some of which stand a good chance of playing a leading role in local government. [redacted]

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-- Control of Kurdish, Azarbayjani and Turkomans populated regions on the USSR's southern border probably would be Moscow's first concern. Soviet ties to leftist elements in each of the three areas would facilitate Soviet efforts to promote pro-Soviet regimes in these areas. [redacted]

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-- Control of a pro-Soviet regime in Baluchistan, which is less likely, would give the Soviets access to port facilities on the Arabian Sea, put them in a position to affect oil routes in the Persian Gulf, and enable them to increase pressures on [redacted]

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[REDACTED]

Pakistan. Control of Iranian borders with Afghanistan would help them control the ability of the insurgents to acquire support. [REDACTED]

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- The weakening of central authority in Tehran might curtail the aggressive, proselytizing compulsions of the current regime. It would also pre-empt US efforts to reestablish influence and presence in a strong nation on the USSR's border. [REDACTED]

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With all the uncertainties and possible disadvantages inherent in the situation, the Soviets seem unlikely to promote such disintegration actively. The Soviets have no guarantee short of military intervention that their assets would prevail in key regions or that the new political entities would prove responsive to their interests. These new regimes might be anxious to prevent Soviet domination and might turn instead to Iraq or the West. [REDACTED]

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The primary disadvantage, in Moscow's view, is that it would end up without the main prize unless it could quickly instill in Tehran a leftist government strong enough to retake the oilfields. Assuming an Iraqi-dominated or affiliated Khuzestan, Soviet ability to use relations with any of Iran's other ethnic regions would not help in the USSR's and East Europe's efforts to gain access to oil. [REDACTED]

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Iraq's claims to dominance in the Gulf would also be strongly reinforced by Iran's decline. The Soviets might thus find themselves facing a strong regional power determined to prevent any superpower incursion in the region. The existence of two, roughly equivalent, powers, preoccupied with each other, better serves Soviet interests. [REDACTED]

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The USSR's concern about possible US exploitation of instability in Iran appears genuine; fragmentation and the creation of additional ambiguities might add to this concern. [REDACTED]

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If mounting pressures on Iran set in train an inevitable process toward disintegration, however, the Soviets would almost certainly take action to minimize the negative impact and to reap the greatest possible advantage. [REDACTED]

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- They would seek to insure that the newly formed neighboring entities were pro-Soviet, using their own contacts and assets within the various regions and establishing formal and supportive links to those in power.

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- They would try to strengthen their own ties to Baghdad and try to forestall the possibility that a more important Iraq might turn toward the West.
- They would seek to maintain ties to the rump government in Tehran, whatever its persuasion, in order to protect their remaining assets within that country and forestall the restoration of US influence. Moscow would not back that government in a revanchist war against Iraq so long as the latter retained its position of dominance and control in the Gulf.
- The possibility of Soviet military intervention, either to stabilize areas along its own borders or to assist a weak, leftist regime in Tehran, would increase significantly. Moscow's assessment of the probably US response to such a move would be a major consideration and the Soviets might well calculate that the US would be unlikely to respond to protect an oil-deficient Iran.

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Pakistan and Turkey

The governments of Pakistan and Turkey would regard the fragmentation of Iran as a catastrophe with grave consequences for their own security because of possible exploitation of the situation by the USSR and by autonomy-minded ethnic minorities. Both would try to forestall any disintegration of Iran and would support the installation of an effective, moderate central government free of Soviet influence in Tehran.

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A 1975 Pakistan-Iran military agreement suggests some of the specific actions the Zia regime might take to advance its own interests rather than to preserve the Iranian Government as envisaged in the agreement. The agreement called for Pakistani support of any remnant of the central government in southeastern Iran, including provision of weapons, supplies, and staff aid to military units; provision of personnel for security duty in Iranian territory, air and naval cover for Iranian territory near Pakistan, bases for Iranian air and naval units; and sanctuary for Iranian leaders.

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[redacted]

The joint agreement assumes at least a minimal ability or willingness of Iranian forces in the southeast to resist an enemy. If Iran were to fragment soon, the immediate enemy would be the local Baluchi leaders and the military units still in the province might not be willing or able to oppose them on behalf of the Khomeini regime. Pakistan would react with dismay to a Baluchi declaration of autonomy or independence in such circumstances. It would probably move quickly to close its border with Iran and might seize Zahedan--the provincial capital through which the main road and rail links to Pakistan run--and the airbase and port at Chah Bahar to pre-empt the consolidation of a Baluchi entity. [redacted]

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Turkey, too, is likely to be moved primarily by self-interest rather than a desire to aid a rump regime in Tehran. Its primary concern would be to make alternate arrangements for the supply of the 20 percent of its oil needs now provided by Iran--presumably with Baghdad. Ankara would also share an interest with Baghdad in ensuring that their own sizeable Kurdish populations are not able to exploit the Tehran's loss of control over Iranian Kurdish regions. [redacted]

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The Turks would exert strong pressures to prevent the creation of an autonomous or independent Kurdish entity, particularly since it would be likely to have a leftist orientation. The Turkish Government might be inclined to support militarily ethnically Turkic Azarbayjanis and their allies who try to pre-empt leftist control of northern Iran. It might also aid their efforts to replace the Khomeini regime. Ankara would seek support from its western allies in any efforts it make to forestall an extension of Soviet influence into Iranian territory. [redacted]

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Selected Minority Groups

